

Are Charter Schools the Answer?

by Mary Jo Hetzel

The great attraction of charter schools is that they promise a creative, innovative and effective alternative to business as usual in urban public schools which have failed children in so many ways. But is that promise real and are charter schools the answer?

Are charter schools the answer to resolving educational inequality, closing the achievement gap, or what we call the opportunity-to-learn gap, increasing financial support to those schools struggling to serve the students in greatest need, increasing parent involvement, ensuring a positive environment for teachers to grow professionally and to collaborate with others in assessing and improving the quality of education in their schools?

If the charter school track record in Chicago, Washington D.C., Philadelphia, New Orleans and Ohio are any indication, the answer is a resounding “No!” Rather, the growth of charter schools within most urban school districts has resulted in:

1) Creaming off the easiest-to-serve, most advantaged students, while rejecting the rest, leaving the public schools to serve those in greatest need with far fewer resources. Students take their per-pupil tax dollars with them into the charter schools, but when they are cast out in large numbers, these dollars do not follow them back into the public system. The regular public schools become a dumping ground and are perceived as such, creating a sense of despair and demoralization. Thus charter reforms actually exacerbate the achievement gap and further entrench an unequal, two-tier system of education.

2) Overall, the track record with regard to academic success has been about the same as or worse than that of the traditional public schools. Remarkably little is known about the actual educational process that goes on in charter schools and if it does indeed differ in any significant way from current public school teaching practices. What research exists suggests that it does not. Creativity and innovation in the actual educational practice has not been a clear strength of charters. This is a very odd basis upon which to launch a massive, nationwide charter school movement.

3) When charter caps are lifted, large numbers of schools in lower-income communities of color have been summarily shut down (often following gentrification patterns), frequently without teachers', students', or parents' prior knowledge and often against their wishes, to be replaced by charter schools which have no obligation to accept the displaced students, leaving chaos, trauma, and crisis in their wake.

4) Entire workforces and teaching staffs of schools have been summarily dismissed, to be replaced by charter schools that are not obligated to hire a single teacher, administrative staff, counselor, clerk or custodian back. Even award-winning, seasoned teachers who have dedicated their lives to their calling within urban communities can be left without a paycheck or any hope for one. Charter schools are free to hire either the best teachers

from the rest of the system, and pay them more, or what has become more common in the private, for-profit charters, hire the most inexperienced, naïve, easily controlled teachers who will do management's bidding at low pay or leave. In general, charter school policy is intended to destroy teachers unions, and with it, basic worker rights and protections, leading to a demoralized, degraded teaching profession that will be unlikely to take the initiative to transform education for the better, but rather do what is minimally required of them.

5) As charter school numbers are permitted to increase, non-profit charters are likely to give way to for-profit management companies and corporate charter school chains. As the door is opened for corporate chains in education to take over management of large numbers of charter schools, the education of poor children is turned into a profitable enterprise. Businessmen replace educators. The goal of education makes its final shift away from educating a democratic citizenry under public, democratic auspices, to that of making company profits, under private, non-accountable auspices, in a competitive environment, which requires ever greater corporate growth and expansion, along with ever greater reductions in costs of adequately serving students – and thus, to generally reduced educational quality, and often, to fraudulent misuse of public funds.

Is this the road we want to be on?

There are no shortcuts to creating equal, quality public education for all children. While there may be some good community-based charter schools staffed by very committed folks, charter schools, *as a general policy for education reform*, is a grand detour, fraught with dangers of commercial privatization that will take us far away from our cherished principle of democratically controlled, equal, quality education. Fortunately, we do have wonderful models of quality public education right here in Boston with remarkable track records of academic success, clear guiding principles and truly creative and innovative practices: pilot schools such as the Boston Arts Academy and Another Course to College, two-way bilingual schools, such as the Rafael Hernandez, and the new Boston Teachers Union School. In these schools, parents, educators, students, and members of the community collaborate as multi-cultural, democratic learning communities to transform education into an interactive process of critical and creative inquiry that engages students' deepest purposes and interests, and supports their holistic growth so that they can, in turn, enrich the quality of life of the broader community. Let's learn from these and other public school models to transform education in Boston for everyone.

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Supporting Documentation: *Keeping the Promise: The Debate Over Charter Schools*, 2008, a Rethinking Schools Publication, www.rethinkingschools.org; see also Citizens for Public Schools in Boston at www.citizensforpublicschools.org for additional related research on charter schools.

